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LIGHTING THE FIRE FOR EDUCATION OF OUR CHILDREN

By Dagny Monette, Y Child Care, Camps, and Family Director

Our country is finally realizing that education doesn't begin at Kindergarten, it begins at birth. The creation of the new "Michigan Office of Great Start" within our state's Department of Education is one sign that things are starting to shift. With this new office, the Governor has declared what educators already knew, our children deserve a "great start" to their education and they deserve to get it now.

Children entering elementary school today have a very different experience than what we did at their age. This is not the kindergarten of our childhoods. Children in kindergarten today are learning what first graders would have been expected to learn just a generation ago. It's up to us, the parents, the educators, and the members of our society, to make sure that these children are prepared to enter into the first year of their formal education.

Research has proven that preschool is the foundation students need for kindergarten. The strength of that foundation is critical. This is where quality plays a huge role. Children who receive quality early education experiences are more likely to read and write at a higher level, score higher on standardized tests, and are more likely to graduate high school and go on to college.

Though, kindergarten readiness isn't just about the academics. Quality preschool programs help children develop cognitively, emotionally, socially, and physically.

Quality preschool programs provide children with opportunities to acquire and develop important language skills. Children who have more exposure to language, reading, and storytelling grow up to be better readers and writers. Children who have had the opportunity to learn social skills in preschool walk into kindergarten excited at the prospect of making new friends and have the advantage of understanding what is expected of them in a classroom setting.

According to the National Institute for Early Education Research, in addition to gaining the math and early reading skills that children need for school, preschool programs help children learn to respect and cooperate with others. Preschool education helps children to develop a love for learning, gain confidence in themselves, and learn to work cooperatively with others. Those are the strengths that will truly give our children a great start in school.

W.B. Yeats said, "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire." At the YMCA Early Childhood Education Center, we are lighting that fire for students from infancy through age five!

We do it by providing early childhood classrooms that are age appropriate, spacious, and staffed by well trained teachers and assistants. We create a positive

learning environment by providing hands-on large and small group activities that engage children in their own learning. We believe that for young children, work is play and we make that work fun and interesting. We want children to love school and to love their work.

Of course, at the Y, it's also about helping children grow into responsible adult members of society. The YMCA core values of caring, honesty, respect, and responsibility are key to the character development of the children we serve. Whether it's in the Infant classroom, in one of our two Toddler rooms, or in either our Preschool or PreK classroom, we take education seriously. We strive to grow strong kids, strong families, strong communities.

For more information on our Early Childhood Education program, contact Dagny Monette at 231- 421-3568 or childcare@gtbayymca.org .